

An investigation into socio-economic problems faced by orphaned secondary school girl children in Gutu District

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Abstract

The aim of this present study was to investigate the socio-economic problems faced by orphaned secondary school girl children in Gutu District of Zimbabwe using the qualitative methodology. The population comprised of all pupils from three secondary schools. A sample of 50 orphaned girls arrived at purposively was used. Data was collected and generated through the use of a questionnaire and an interview. The study revealed that orphaned secondary school girls face a number of socio-economic challenges like failure to get school fees, inadequate food, failure to buy uniforms and being discriminated against. Some of the orphaned girls deal with their problems by engaging in self-help activities such as plating other people's hair for a fee, digging in neighbour's gardens and doing laundry for some people. The study recommends that the government's AIDS Fund generated through monthly deductions from all workers' salaries should be directed towards the needs of orphaned children in a more holistic and determined manner. The private sector should also be encouraged to channel some of their assistance towards orphaned girls in schools.

Keywords: Socio-economic problems, orphaned, secondary school, investigation, children

1. Introduction

The education of girls is an important part of their lives because education empowers people to understand their rights and to participate as citizens in a nation's development and progress. Education empowers them for effective participation in all other sectors by increasing their knowledge, self-confidence and self-esteem, thereby improving their perception of self in relation to others, increasing their capacity for negotiating for their rights (Dhlembeu, 2005) [3]. A study conducted by Chitsike (2000) [2] revealed that most AIDS orphans in Zimbabwe find themselves unable to proceed with education because they do not have school fees, they are unable to get money to pay for food, electricity or water. Mpofu (2014) states that the situation of orphaned girls is particularly difficult in an urban set up where the cash economy is the only means by which basic needs can be obtained. UNICEF (2004) [16] estimated that ninety-two percent of children orphaned by AIDS were in sub-saharan Africa, where AIDS ate away at communities already affected by poverty, war and corruption. In the African countries hit hardest by HIV/AIDS (Zimbabwe included), the extended family was traditionally the source of support and care for orphans and other children needing special protection. As Moyo (2012) [9] observes, in the face of enormous numbers of children without parental care in Zimbabwe, the extended family is increasingly becoming over extended and unable to provide its traditional level of protection and support. A pattern has now developed where a parent becomes ill, ceases to contribute to the family income and increased medical expenses impoverish the family (Dube, 2008) [5]. Because of the girl-child's socially constructed gender roles relating to household chores, she bears the brunt of the problems emanating from death and illness in the home (Moyo, 2012) [9]. Chitsike (2000) [2] postulates that the girl has to take care of

the sick, cook for everyone and generally takeover the mother's duties. It is on account of this information that this study empirically investigated the really socio-economic problems faced by orphaned secondary school girls to ascertain the magnitude of the problem.

1.1 Statement of the problem

The HIV/AIDS pandemic and other causes of death among parents and guardians, have increased the number of orphans in secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Girls, who already face a number of obstacles to their education due to traditional stereotypes, have their situation exacerbated by being orphans.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The study investigated the socio-economic problems faced by secondary school orphans in order to expose the magnitude of the problem and come up with suggestions to mitigate the situation.

2. Objectives of the study

- To establish how the orphaned girls cope with their socio-economic problems.
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- To suggest possible remedies to alleviate the socio-economic problems experienced by orphaned girls in secondary schools.

3. Research questions

To find answers to the main research question the study was guided by the following sub-questions:

1. What is the nature of the socio-economic problems faced by orphaned secondary school girls?

2. How do orphaned girls deal with the socio-economic problems they face?
3. What can be done to mitigate the problems experienced by orphaned secondary school girls?

3.1 Review of Related Literature

The problem of orphaned girls can be vividly illustrated if we observe the trampling of their rights by society. The Human Rights Watch Report (2002) [6] points out that for each child who had lost a parent to AIDS, one or two school age children were likely to be caring for an ill parent, acting as breadwinners for the household, or otherwise unable to attend school. Singizi (2006) [13] postulates that government statistics confirmed that girls in AIDS affected families were more likely than boys to be withdrawn from school when parents were short of resources or needed help to care for the family resources or needed to help take care for the family.

One of the most frequent AIDS related rights violations suffered by children world-wide was their rights to information on HIV/AIDS (Pachauri, 2009) [11]. Young people in most developing countries had poor access to appropriate information and this problem was compounded by the effect of AIDS on school enrolment (Tonner, 2008). The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS (2002) agreed that all countries should work towards implementation by 2015 of appropriate counseling and psychological support, ensuring their enrolment in school and access to shelter and protecting orphans and vulnerable children from all sorts of abuse, violence, exploitation, discrimination, trafficking and loss of inheritance.

According to Pachauri (2009) [11], some of the problems faced by girl children are intricately related to their deprivation of the opportunity to pursue education. As Bhargava and Bigombe (2003) [1] point out, the ability of bereaved children to continue in school depends on household resources and the public support for education. In Uganda for example, enrolment increased by 30% after school fees were abolished showing that poverty is a huge hindrance to education of children particularly girls. MacFaden and Mvududu (2001)[8] observed that within the education system, girls still lag behind boys with high dropout rates due to pregnancies, lack of school fees and other family related crises. In Botswana most girls leave school early and only one fifth complete high school and in Mozambique some of the factors contributing to high dropout rates for girls include early marriages and pregnancies, sexual harassment and the abuse of female pupils in schools (MacFaden and Mvududu, 2001) [8].

There are a number of things which prevent orphans and other vulnerable children from gaining access to education (Tomer, 2008) [15]. Uniform manufacturers have pushed the cost of uniforms beyond the reach of many parents. Guardians who may genuinely wish to assist the orphaned girls may ultimately give up because of the escalating costs of uniforms (Singizi, 2006) [13]. Household duties also constitute a kind of barrier to education for girl-children who may have to care for the sick adults and younger children (Parrot, 2003) [12]. Girls can contribute to household livelihood, for example, in agricultural or wage labour. They may be withdrawn from school to do such duties (Sweetman, 2008). As Chitsike (2000) [2] argues, it is the girls who because of cultural practices, cook food, wash plates and pots, do the laundry and

iron clothes for all the family members and this is an extra burden to the girl-child.

Stigma and discrimination at school constitute one of the serious problems that the girl child has to contend with. This may result in them not attending school (Dorsey, 2009) [4]. Fellow pupils tend to look down upon colleagues who appear inferior and thus different from them. The orphaned girl might have a torn pair of school shoes, old and torn blouses and skirts, torn and dirty pairs of socks and so on (Tomer, 2008) [15]. Thus, the general appearance depicting poverty makes the orphaned girl a subject of ridicule and / or pity. If their skins are not oiled daily and they are not able to get soap for bathing or any soap for that matter, they will obviously appear untidy (Dhlembeu, 2005) [3]. The girls may not even afford a simple comb their hair; some guardians might overlook getting the orphaned girls' hair trimmed at the hair salon and if the hair is unkempt, this depicts the girls as unrefined and not conforming to the school's ethos and tone and they may be viewed as rude and rebellious.

4. Research Methodology

The study used the qualitative research methodology. The methodology had the advantage of giving the respondents the opportunity to freely express their views on the problems they encounter due to their economic hardships. The study used the case study design. This allowed the researcher to focus on small units of analysis that helped to explain the socio-economic challenges faced by the girls in secondary schools (Leedy, 2009) [7]. The sample for the study was purposively selected. The researcher selected three secondary schools for the study. These were selected on the basis of their proximity to and easy accessibility by the researcher. The total number of respondent was made up of fifty girls who were orphans. Data was collected through the use of a questionnaire and an interview. Permission was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education before the study was conducted. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of the findings of the study.

4.1 Data presentation and analysis

The bio-data of the respondents is presented in tabular form for easy analysis. The data from the open-ended section of the questionnaire and interview focusing on socio-economic problems faced by orphaned secondary school girls is presented qualitatively. The data is then discussed and analysed on the basis of the themes that emerged from the responses from girls.

Table 1: Respondents by age

Age in years	Frequency	Percentage
13	2	4
14	1	2
15	7	14
16	20	40
17	15	30
18	5	10
Total	50	100

All the girls in the study are between the ages of thirteen and eighteen years. The bulk of them (80%) are above fifteen years of age. The thirteen and fourteen age group were just 6% of the sample.

4.2 Personal well-being of the orphans

Information generated from the open-ended questionnaire questions and interviews, revealed a lot of violations of these children's rights. Many of these violations bordered on human rights violations. They were subjected to such violations as being denied to make suggestions on issues affecting their lives. Some were denied to attend church services. Some girls indicated that they were subjected to child labour. While the girls admitted that laundry and washing plates were normal chores in the home, they complained that chores were used as punishment for wrong doing. The work was excessive and sometimes too difficult for a young girl. This particularly applied to being asked to dig a large portion of the field where maize seed would be planted. Girls complained about being denied time to study by cruel step mothers who would switch off electricity or blow out the candle while they were trying to do homework.

Some girl's complained that their personal well-being was not being taken care of for example, some complained that guardians did not give them enough food. Instead, guardians gave their own children more food, the orphan's plate always had less food they pointed out. They were exposed to dangerous situations by being sent to the shops at night. Some stated that they were sent to buy airtime cards, or to buy some beer for their guardians, exposing them to molestation in the darkness of the night.

Some orphaned girls said that they were not sent to the clinic for treatment when they fell ill. The guardian's children on the other hand were preferentially treated in this respect. One complaint related to overcrowding which resulted in some girls sleeping under guardian's bed.

Problems closely related to girl's sexuality came up for discussion. One girl complained that her aunt's husband always went to the toilet in semi-nudity, passing through the girl's room. Some of the girls alleged that they were forced into sex by their aunts who brought boyfriends to the house for the girls. In one case a girl said one might get involved in sexual activities in order to overcome stress caused by a plethora of hardships. Some girls pointed out that even the female guardians would refuse to give them cotton for the monthly cycle and as a result they resorted to cloth which caused them discomfort.

4.3 Issues related to education

With regards to issues related to their education, they observed that school fees was paid very late, sometimes after periods ranging from one week to a whole term. This practice affected their education negatively since they were always sent away to collect school fees. They pointed out that some of their colleagues had in fact dropped out of school as a result of lack of school fees. This tallies with observations by Pachauri (2009) [11] who state that some of the problems faced by girl-children are intricately related to their deprivation of the opportunity to pursue education. The ability of bereaved children to continue in school depends on household resources and the public support for education. As MacFaden and Mvududu (2001) [8] found out in Uganda, enrolment increased by 30% after school fees were abolished.

Orphaned girls said some problems they faced at school were coming from staff, especially ladies who could not be trusted with secrets or problems that the orphaned girls would have confided to the teacher. Some teachers asked the girls

confidential information in the presence of fellow pupils or members of staff. Girls also accused teachers for forcing them to confess about things they had not done. A senior woman was in one ease accused of cutting to shreds pairs of stockings which were of the wrong size yet the girl had struggled to get them. The girls, however, acknowledged the positive role played by counseling teachers who in some cases could be confided in. As Dorsey (2009) [4] argues, stigma and discrimination at school constitute one of the serious problems the girl orphaned child has to contend with. Teachers and fellow pupils tend to look down upon them. The orphaned girl might have a torn pair of school shoes, old and torn blousers and skirts, torn and dirty pairs of socks (Tomer, 2008) [15].

5. Conclusions

This study has established the major socio-economic problems that are faced by orphaned girls in Gweru district. The main ones are failure to get school fees, inadequate uniform and being discriminated by their guardians. The girls face these problems because they are orphans and guardians treat them differently from their own children. Some orphaned girls deal with their problems by engaging in self-help activities such as plating other people's hair for a fee, digging in neighbours gardens as well as doing laundry for some people. Some of the girls indicated that some of their teachers particularly lady teachers did not treat them properly and as a result they could not divulge some of the sensitive problems they were experiencing at home and at school. However, most of them had confidence in the guidance and counseling teachers whom they could confide their secrets with.

6. Recommendations

In the light of the above findings and conclusions, the study recommends the following:

- The Government's AIDS Fund generated through monthly deductions from all worker's salaries needs to be directed towards the needs of orphaned children in a more holistic and determined.
- More non-governmental organizations should be invited to assist the girl orphans both in the schools and within the larger community.
- Schools should hold workshops for guardians who stay with girls who are orphans and share with them the importance of looking after these children properly.
- The local community leadership should engage the private sector to generate resources like school fees, uniform and sanitary wear for the girls.

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